

VZCZCXYZ0000  
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0258/01 0731554  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 131554Z MAR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4624  
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000258

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NEA/FO (GRAY), NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); DRL  
(JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)  
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIA/DEMOCRATIC REFORM I: PROMOTING A MORE  
LEVEL PLAYING FIELD AHEAD OF 2009 ELECTIONS

REF: TUNIS 1404

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

-----  
Summary  
-----

¶1. (C) Tunisia's 2009 presidential and legislative elections represent an important opportunity to promote the President's Freedom Agenda and to press for tangible political reform. We have long focused on promoting greater freedom and expression and association in Tunisia. In the months leading up to the 2009 elections, we will advocate for increased political openness and election-related reforms, including increased access to the media for opposition parties, clarification of legal requirements for candidates, and greater electoral transparency. We are developing and implementing programs to support this advocacy. While President Ben Ali is expected to run and win in 2009, our efforts could result in greater opposition party representation in both chambers of Parliament.

¶2. (C) This report, the first in a three-part series on the 2009 elections climate, lays out our strategy for promoting a more level playing field. Parts II and III of this series will focus on trends affecting political participation and the perspective of opposition parties, respectively. End Summary.

-----  
Elections-Specific Reform Advocacy  
-----

¶3. (C) Promoting democratic reform and respect for human rights are the Embassy's number one Mission Strategic Plan (MSP) objective. It is our assessment that Tunisia is ready for greater political freedom. Most Tunisians seem to accept that, absent a monumental change on the part of President Ben Ali's regime, the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) will continue to dominate. There is a growing desire for a more open political system, however. Our civil society contacts tell us their three biggest concerns about the 2009 elections are uncertainty about the criteria for the nomination of presidential candidates, the ability of candidates to campaign freely (encompassing greater access to the media), and the likelihood of electoral fraud. (Note: Part III of this series provides further background about these concerns.)

¶4. (C) Accordingly, in 2008 and 2009, the Embassy plans to focus its efforts on encouraging tangible steps to help level the playing field between the dominant ruling party and

several small but viable opposition parties. Specifically, we will advocate for:

-- Increased access to the media for opposition political parties: Because it is widely believed that many media outlets take editorial direction from the GOT, we will encourage the GOT to send an unambiguous signal, for example, in the form of a speech by President Ben Ali, that print and electronic media are encouraged to report on the activities of opposition parties. While some private media outlets, including weekly magazines, are already pushing the boundaries in covering some opposition activities, their readership remains limited. Ultimately, Tunisia's higher circulation, mainstream publications can be expected to maintain the status quo, unless state-owned media take the lead.

-- Clarity about the elections law: Uncertainty about the provisions of the expected 2009 presidential elections-specific law stipulating the requirements for the nomination of presidential candidates is impeding planning on the part of opposition parties. Rather than promulgating such a law a few months before the elections, the GOT should be encouraged to do so at least a year beforehand.

-- Greater transparency throughout the electoral process: Opposition parties alleged bias in the administration of previous elections. For example, in 2004, opposition party lists were reportedly subjected to greater scrutiny and therefore more likely to be rejected based on technicalities than were those of the ruling party. Opposition parties and civil society groups have also criticized the non-transparent nature of the vote-counting process. While we don't believe the GOT will permit serious monitoring by domestic or international observers, we should advocate for both in the name of transparency and accountability, the basis for any

democratic system.

-----  
Programs Promoting Free and Fair Elections  
-----

15. (C) Many complaints surrounding the 2004 presidential elections stem from the fact that the Ministry of the Interior administers elections. With a view to better understanding the electoral lay of the land and the extent to which legitimate complaints about past practices could be addressed, the Embassy is exploring, through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), having an NGO with experience in elections management perform a third-party assessment of Tunisia's electoral system. This study, the results of which will be made available to the public, would provide an unbiased appraisal, allowing the Embassy to better target its resources on key electoral reform needs. Civil society would also benefit, as most civil society groups lack the resources to conduct such a study themselves. While some NGOs and opposition parties publish spot reports, none have conducted a comprehensive review of the electoral process. Moreover, the findings of domestic groups are often dismissed by the GOT as lacking in credibility. Due to the GOT's sensitivity regarding foreign funding for such activities, the Embassy would not be directly involved with the third party conducting the evaluation.

16. (C) We are also working to help Tunisians learn from the electoral experiences of other countries in the region. In February, the Embassy hosted a digital video conference (DVC) with a member of Mauritania's independent electoral commission to discuss that country's successful 2007 elections. In conjunction with MEPI, we are planning to send a group of Tunisian civil society representatives to an elections observation seminar in Morocco. The program will bring together the Tunisians with Moroccans who participated in various aspects of domestic elections observation with a view to imparting lessons learned that could be beneficial in the Tunisian context. We will also arrange a DVC with elections observers in Morocco, for those unable to attend the Morocco elections training. These programs will help

Tunisian participants better understand how to conduct limited domestic elections observation.

-----  
Broader Context: Promoting the Freedom Agenda...  
-----

17. (C) It has long been this Embassy's assessment that the best way to support lasting political reform is to focus our efforts on promoting increased freedom of expression and freedom of association. We also believe that there are at least some in the GOT who believe Tunisia is ready for greater political openness. With respect to freedom of expression, we have seen some promising signs in recent months indicating a degree of increased latitude in press coverage, and we have reason to believe that some media houses and independent journalists are prepared to continue pushing boundaries. That said, it is clear that some powerful players in the GOT continue to resist such openings. Realistically, progress will be incremental at best.

18. (C) Ultimately, genuine and lasting reform requires that the GOT leadership recognize that greater political freedom is in its interests. Indeed, in a variety of public and private statements, President Ben Ali and other high-level officials have indicated that they are committed to greater freedom. To a certain extent, then, we can simply call on GOT leaders to implement the steps to which they have committed themselves. Since regime stability is considered paramount, the best way to make this case is to emphasize that political repression breeds antagonism and extremism. The threat posed by the December 2006/January 2007 "Soliman" terror cell serves to illustrate this point. We need to take full advantage of opportunities for high-level interactions to make this case. The Ambassador will continue his efforts to persuade the GOT to allow greater freedom of expression and association. Reinforcing these themes during GOT meetings in Washington and during high-level visits from Washington is also critical. Recognizing that US leverage with the GOT is limited, the Embassy will also continue to coordinate our efforts with other like-minded diplomatic missions in Tunisia. For example, the Ambassador and other EmbOffs are in close touch with our French counterparts in the run-up to the State Visit of President Sarkozy. We are actively seeking strong coordination with other like-minded missions, as well.

-----  
... With US Elections as a Hook  
-----

19. (C) Since the GOT has thus far proven reluctant to engage on these issues, concurrent with our efforts to lobby the government, the Embassy has planned a series of programs for members of the public related to the US elections. Our goal is to help expose Tunisian contacts to various aspects of our electoral system, with a view to shaping dialogue locally about the benefits of open political participation. Past and future programs include:

- A speech by the Ambassador on the US elections that emphasized the values that underlie the US electoral process;
- A series of DVCs in French and Arabic by US political scientists about the American electoral process, from the primaries to elections to the new Administration.
- A lecture by a locally based US sociology instructor on election-related laws and processes;
- A panel discussion for Fulbright alumni in which panelists shared their personal experiences from various elections in which they had participated (whether as party activists or average voters). A similar panel will be part of a week-long program for American Studies professors;
- An all-night elections day open house, to include panel

discussions and mock elections;

- Sending Tunisian journalists to the United States on reporting tours and other programs, possibly to include the Democratic and Republican party conventions.

- Sending political and civil society activists on International Visitor and Leadership Programs (IVLP) and other programs with electoral themes. For example, two Tunisian politicians have been proposed for a regional MEPI program that takes prominent female politicians from the region to the US to examine the elections/campaign process.

-----  
Comment  
-----

¶10. (C) There is no doubt that if Ben Ali does run, as expected, he will win a fifth term in office. We do not expect our efforts to support a more level playing field for other presidential candidates to change that fact. We note, however, that there is a small possibility that Ben Ali will not run. However, if the electoral process becomes more free and fair, he will win with a lower -- but still high ) margin than the 94.9 percent vote that was ascribed to him in ¶2004. This is the best we can expect under the current circumstances. There may be more tangible results on the legislative side, however. If opposition parties are allowed to compete in a more free and fair legislative contest, we can expect to see greater representation by opposition parties in both chambers of Parliament. We will know democratic reforms in Tunisia are really progressing if any of the truly independent opposition parties win parliamentary seats.

¶11. (C) Progress, however, is likely to be made in small steps (if at all). In our human rights dialogue, GOT leaders have repeatedly told us that they prefer to discuss general themes, rather than specific cases or problems. We have found, though, that in some cases at least, raising individual cases has led to progress. Thus, in the context of our advocacy for political and electoral reform, we should also be prepared to raise specific challenges that the GOT can address. A clear, consistent message on such political reforms, both in Washington and Tunisia, is essential to fostering a vibrant civil society and an open democratic society. Tunisia, with its tradition of religious tolerance and rights for women, has the potential to be a model for the region, but unless the GOT takes steps to address the underlying causes of disenfranchisement and political apathy it risks undermining the progress Tunisia has made. Parts II and III of this series take a closer look these challenges.  
End Comment.  
GODEC